

KERSHISNIK

FROM A1

remembers. "Here I'd made this big deal out of doing this ... and I didn't know what to paint."

So he started small, sketching some angels in a notebook.

The result: a 17-foot-long Christmas-themed painting so admired and acclaimed that in December BYU brings it out of its special storage compartment in the museum and hangs it in a place of honor.

The school acquired it when a donor bought the painting and bequeathed it to the school, much to the delight of the artist who painted it. His studio is in downtown Provo, only a few miles away, he can view it whenever he wants, and the museum is a consummate caretaker.

Which brings us back to Jeff. "Don't touch the ..." he called out as he bee-lined toward the painting.

The alleged offender quickly cut him off.

"Not to worry," he said, his hands stretched in front of him. "I painted this."

"You're Brian!" said Jeff. "I am," said Brian, and the two of them spent the next several minutes chatting about "Nativity." How long did it take to paint? What are the angels thinking? Where did he paint it? The guard was a fan!

So goes the life of an artist. Everyone knows what you painted, few know what you look like.

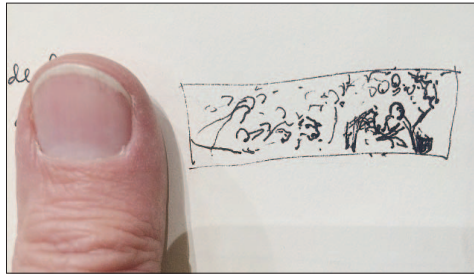
Brian Kershnik, 53, one of Utah's most accomplished and celebrated artists, talked recently with the Deseret News about his life, his work, and the making of "Nativity."

DN: *Thanks so much for your time today. Do you consider "Nativity" your signature painting?*

BK: It's probably what I'm most noted for. It gets a lot of attention, especially at Christmastime.

DN: *And it wouldn't have happened if you hadn't challenged your students — and yourself?*

BK: I was going to be (at BYU) teaching for just one se-



BRIAN KERSHISNIK

This thumbnail-sized sketch was the beginning of Brian Kershnik's celebrated painting, "Nativity."

mester, and because I wanted my students to be ambitious I thought well I need to be ambitious too. So I went into the studio they provided for me next to the classroom and stretched the biggest canvas I could stretch — and then immediately lost my confidence. I was afraid of this huge canvas. I'd never painted anything of that size. I had some ideas before I stretched the canvas, but immediately all my ideas felt stupid.

DN: *How did you finally get going?*

BK: In my sketchbook I began listing various ideas to put on this terrifyingly large canvas. I started drawing angels or spirits or otherworldly witnesses. I thought about the births of my own children and how densely witnessed those events felt. Then I thought, I'll do the birth of Jesus. I did a little sketch, just tiny, about as big as my thumb. I knew at that point that's what I was going to try to do, and because I was so afraid of the canvas and because this was such a rich and spiritually significant subject, I knew if I wasn't careful I would descend into more and more timidity about proceeding. So I went to the canvas and started at Mary's forehead and began. I had in mind the family in front and then just this river of angels witnessing the event, and then speeding off to tell the shepherds.

DN: *Who are the women next to Mary and Joseph?*

BK: A friend, Joe Ostraff, when he learned I was going to do a Nativity, said well you've

got to put in the midwives. There's no mention about midwives in the accounts of Jesus' birth. But the record is very brief. Most of what we know, the visual memory we have, is people imagining what it was like. It seemed so obvious to me that there would be women there to help with the birth, so I decided to put midwives in. In my experience, under such circumstances, women come.

DN: *And the dog and her pups in the corner?*

BK: I wanted to put in conventional animals in the stable, but I ran out of room. I like the idea in Western art that the dog has always been a symbol of fidelity. Jesus is kind of the ultimate expression of an impossible promise fulfilled. So it seemed appropriate if there's going to be an animal in it, the symbolism of the dog worked well for me. I'm fairly confident if that breed of Labrador existed at all back then, there probably weren't many in that part of Judea. But I'm a dog person. Only the dog can see the glorious river of angels. The mortals depicted, like us, usually are understandably and rightly distracted with the quotidian tasks at hand.

DN: *How many angels are there?*

BK: I've counted them a number of times, but I come up with different numbers. I rather like not knowing exactly. I also imagine this to be the vanguard of countless others.

DN: *How rewarding was the experience for you?*

BK: Most of the time I am bigger than the paintings I

work on. This one was so much bigger than me. When I was working on it I couldn't see the whole thing. It was a wonderful experience being able to get lost on something so big.

DN: *Was becoming an artist something you saw yourself doing at an early age?*

BK: I always loved to draw growing up. My father was a petroleum geologist — I was born in Oklahoma and lived in Angola, Bangkok, Texas and Pakistan, where I finished high school — and he used to entertain us with cartoony drawings. I loved watching him to do that. But I had no idea I would be an artist. I thought artists were dead people in books. I didn't want to be a dead person in a book.

DN: *What was your first career plan?*

BK: I wanted to be an architect. I went to the University of Utah before going on a (LDS) mission to Denmark. They had no undergraduate program in architecture so they just said get a degree in whatever you want. I enjoyed my ceramics class, so I decided I'd get a degree in that. After my mission I enrolled at BYU and while I was studying art I kind of got derailed and never became an architect.

DN: *Do you remember selling your first painting?*

BK: It was a little painting called Pink House. It was in a student show at BYU. I remember the painting was \$75 and a lobster — that was the price I posted. The girl who bought it, she was a student, paid \$75 and took me to the Market Street Broiler for a Maine lobster.

DN: *When did you think about painting as a way to make a living?*

BK: I was in art for quite a while before it occurred to me that it was something you could do. My assumption early on was I would teach at a university. All my role models were my professors.

DN: *What led you away from teaching?*

BK: I went to graduate school at the University of Texas in Austin. When I was about to graduate I just suddenly thought, I'm not ready to teach. I need to find out who I am with this art a little more deeply. I was married, my wife at the time was from Kanosh, so we moved to Kanosh.

DN: *And became a starving artist?*

BK: (Laughs) You know, very few go hungry in Kanosh, so it's a good place to be an artist. No one buys your work, but they fill your car with tomatoes and zucchini while you're at church. Our families were very generously supportive.

DN: *So the world didn't immediately beat a path to your door?*

BK: One of the difficulties in establishing an art career is it takes a while before there are enough people who want to buy your work so that it's happening regularly. It's not like a gallon of milk. A great collector will buy like six paintings in a lifetime. You need a lot of people who will be buying six paintings in their lifetime before you're selling very regularly.

DN: *How long before you found your niche?*

BK: I feel like for me it was more a matter of if you do enough work then your own inevitable style has time and space to emerge. In the process of doing lots and lots of work you start to see the way that you turn a metaphor, or the way that you tend to simplify or complicate a composition. I think it's a dangerous thing for an artist to make a decision about what they're going to do and execute it. I think it's better to shut up and work. They used to tell us in school, hurry up and do your first bad 500 paintings, and that's really great advice.

DN: *In a paragraph, please describe your style.*

BK: Yeah, that's hard. I kind of think of it as somewhat of a mythological autobiography. They are all paintings that

emerge from my own experience. Whatever I'm painting, whether they're women, men, dogs, houses, they're all exploring things I am learning or things I am asking about or things I'm wondering about. My paintings are more about following the thread of a question, rather than delivering some sort of an answer. They're not self portraits, well they're not visual, but they are emotional self portraits, or they are — this is a long paragraph — paintings about the idea of being a person. I'm not doing portraits of you but when I do what I do well you will see yourself in the paintings. There will be a familiar pang or delight or angst or laughter. It will be something very familiar and hopefully connecting. My people in my paintings, they're not grand, they're not unattainable, they are just regular heavy-footed dancers, a little bit awkward, but approachable I think. And the dogs too, I suppose.

DN: *You sprinkle healthy portions of humor into your conversation as well as your art. How important is humor to you?*

BK: Humor is a big part of my relations with my family and with my friends, and it is a way into a certain intimacy with my subjects. I try to be careful never to laugh at the people in my paintings. There's a way you laugh with your children that's very different than laughing at them. With my paintings I feel that way. I feel like I need to love them. I don't have any business painting anyone — they're not actual people you understand — until I feel a connection to them. If I'm identifying anyone's stupidity, it needs to be mine. And I do love myself, so I don't have any trouble laughing at myself.

Brian Kershnik is represented by David Ericson Fine Art in Salt Lake City, as well as Meyer Gallery in Park City, where he will be having his next exhibition in February. For information, go to kershnik.com. EMAIL: benson@deseretnews.com

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